NEMA 2017 Annual Conference Session: Checking our Paradigms at the Door

Session description: Shifting national trends may seem to question our institutions’ traditionally held values, but are they? This challenging discussion will confront paradigms about real and perceived shifts in the public’s relationships with museums. By exchanging experiences and ideas, we hope to resolve conundrums such as: have shifting federal priorities changed our community roles; should we adopt new strategies or intentionally take no new actions and continue a course of neutrality; do we change our approach to programming and exhibits; can we afford the risk of being bold?

The fundamental question: how do museums respond to highly politicized changes in public discourse.

Moderator: Wendy Lull, Seacoast Science Center President emerita  207-696-7751  wwlull@gmail.com

Jim Chase, President  603-436-8043 ext. 15  j.chase@sscnh.org
Seacoast Science Center  570 Ocean Blvd. Rye, NH 03870-2104

Advocacy for “informal advocates” in the digital age. The Seacoast Science Center (SSC) is not a policy shop but we do have a keen interest in environmental issues influenced by government policies that are currently in flux thanks to a variable political landscape. We’ll talk about strategies to be purposeful and intentional with advocacy messaging from a place where we are not experts although we move in circles with institutions that are. We all recognize the power of social media (SM) and we will discuss how our institution’s relationship with SM can advance advocacy messaging and even be a measure of mission impact as measured by public engagement with our SM content. Social media can ultimately help to define an organization’s identity in terms of external advocacy for its institutional vision.

I’ll share the example of my colleague in Colorado and what we have done at the SSC to become more purposeful in managing and delivering our advocacy content as it relates the SSC social media channels.

Janie Cohen, Director Fleming Museum of Art  802-656-0750  Janie.Cohen@uvm.edu
University of Vermont  61 Colchester Ave. Burlington, VT 05405

As a university museum, the Fleming Museum of Art at the University of Vermont has considered boldness a mandate and has never shied away from controversy. We constantly recalibrate what inclusion, institutional voice, experiential, and participatory can be and can mean. We have felt the shift in national trends, including anti-immigrant, anti-freedom of political expression, retracting LGBTQ rights, etc. as a motivator in exploring our boundaries. As museums, we have a voice of authority that, in its openness, inclusion, and creativity, can help communities to counteract the more hurtful and harmful tenor of national discourse. What is the range of appropriate roles for the museum to play: witness, convener, facilitator, provocateur, advocate, agitator? What do we risk by taking on these roles?

I will share how the Fleming Museum has responded to recent national trends through the scheduling of two important exhibitions this year, our approach to voice and interpretation in one of them, and extensive, bold programming. I will also share an example of the Museum having played a provocateur role many years ago, and the difference that it made in public dialogue around an issue within the state.
Museums hold a certain degree of power and authority as curators and designers of exhibits and programming. Must we be dismissive of contradictory opinion to do justice to our causes, values, beliefs and portrayals of issues important to us? How can one create exhibits (and/or signage, programming, etc.) for the general public that acknowledges diverse perspectives, life experiences, and viewpoints, and creates space for discourse? The Seacoast Science Center (SSC) is working with university learning scientists to explore ways to develop a climate change exhibit that highlights an area of concern, then offers vignettes of varying perspectives, which allow 1) folks to find their own entry-points into the “conversation” and 2) the exhibit to give voice and depth to an issue with complex financial, environmental and social implications.

Regarding programming, specifically public lecture and film series, I will touch on the import and impacts of alignment/partnership with different organizations. SSC advocates for science, ocean health, and necessity of ongoing marine science research. We communicate our support in many ways, one of which is through public education in the form of lecture/film/discussion series. This involves aligning ourselves with external mouthpieces, experts and partner organizations. We are completely comfortable about letting the consequences of advocacy in these areas fall where they will with regards to donors, board members and partnerships, save one - New Hampshire Division of Parks and Recreation. The health of this partnership is key for SSC, since we operate within a state park, and so our alignment with various organizations needs to be approved by them. This can complicate film and discussion topics and selections with organizations such as the League of Conservation Voters and Conservation Law Foundation.

My talking points will be around partner alignment, challenges, values congruence, and deal breakers.

---

Hannah Pickard, NNOCCI Network Manager 617-226-2149 hpickard@neaq.org
New England Aquarium  1 Central Wharf, Boston, MA 02110

While it is easy to think about an institution as having one large voice, the voice is actually many different people acting on behalf of the institution. So even if leadership has decided to say, “Yes! We are a scientific organization! We need to stand up for science!” The next question is how do you embody that statement? And who embodies that statement?

We will think about the role of internal and external communications – both words and actions that use the “institutional voice” and think carefully about who is acting on behalf of the institution and why.

· How is leadership positioning institutional work in the greater context to help employees and volunteers understand how they are contributing?
· How do you define and communicate: Who is acting on behalf of the institution? Who is acting as individuals with the support of the institution? Who is acting only for themselves personally?
· What is the role of the institutional position in supporting an individual’s sense of empowerment and efficacy?

I will share examples from New England Aquarium around the March for Science and examples from Monterey Bay Aquarium around the People’s Climate March to illustrate some decision-making challenges and launch the discussion into how are we embodying our institutional points-of-view.
From my position, and that of a vast majority of my colleagues, it is apparent that current government leadership is actively opposing the liberal values held by our colleagues, their boards and the public we all serve. I recognize that there are exceptions to the opinion. I think the label, liberal, is accurate in its most expansive definition.

What then is our response to the particular issues and crisis that result from this opposition?

Should we follow the example of the Lincoln Cottage – remembering this was a response specifically to the election but can stand as a very workable model for responding to a variety of crisis – the staff of the Cottage offered the public an open house in the evening where people could come and meditate by themselves in a historic place [one with a strong historical message] or involve themselves in informal conversations with other individuals, or participate in a facilitated conversation with a larger group?

Or, is it acceptable and does it fulfill the responsibility to community for my own organization to respond to specific issues and crisis by putting them in historical context within an historic re-creation and encouraging people to discuss those issues in the context of the past and the impact currently and the future? Who chooses the issues? Can we really encourage conversation and not dominate that conversation with our individual or institutional points of view? Is it our job to be neutral and just facilitate? Or, do we take a position? If we take a position, who determines that point of view?